



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

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**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

**International Programs Division**

Annual Report FY 2016

January 11, 2017

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This annual report has been prepared by the International Programs Division of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The report covers the period from October 1, 2015, to September 30, 2016 (fiscal year 2016).

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## Acknowledgments

In addition to the division's staff, the following employees of the agency contributed to this annual report: Kevin FARMER, Jon FRIPP, Jay FUHRER, Jonathan GROVEMAN, Tom HEDT, Charles KOME, Mike KUCERA, Zamir LIBOHOVA, Thomas REINSCH, David SMITH, and Mike STROBEL.

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*NRCS National Leader of World Soil Resources  
Thomas Reinsch speaks at the Week of Soil in  
Honduras event, October 14, 2015.*

Photo courtesy of Escuela Agrícola Panamericana

## Executive Summary

The International Programs Division (IPD) of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) supported the agency's international efforts to address global food security, advance scientific cooperation, and the sustainable management of natural resources. Subject matter experts helped foreign governments address a variety of topics, such as increasing crop yields, mitigating drought impacts, exploring climate-smart agricultural approaches, and recommending policy reforms based on scientific evidence.

In fiscal year (FY) 2016, NRCS staff undertook 36 international trips to support numerous activities, which included teaching at workshops in South Africa, participating in multilateral meetings in Italy, speaking at conferences in Honduras and South Korea, and providing technical assistance in Pakistan. Two employees also started their 3-year residential assignments in the Federated States of Micronesia and Republic of Palau. These tours are part of the agencies ongoing commitment to provide long-term technical assistance to the Pacific Island Nations.

IPD also helped facilitate 18 requests for NRCS experts to meet with 240 foreign visitors at headquarters and field locations. Aside from bilateral meetings with Canada and Mexico to strengthen regional cooperation in the management of shared resources, other foreign visitors received presentations and guidance on a variety of topics, such as soil and water conservation. Additionally, agency representatives met with two multinational delegations and supported two presentation requests from the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).

Overall, international travel and visits by foreign officials to the United States provided NRCS employees the opportunity to engage bilaterally with 22 individual countries in FY 2016.



*NRCS Chief Jason Weller (at table, on right) learns from Team USA about their travels and competition experience at the International Soil Judging Contest in Gödöllő, Hungary, during a visit to USDA headquarters, December 3, 2015. Team USA, consisting of four university students, won first place overall and one participant also claimed first place honors individually.*

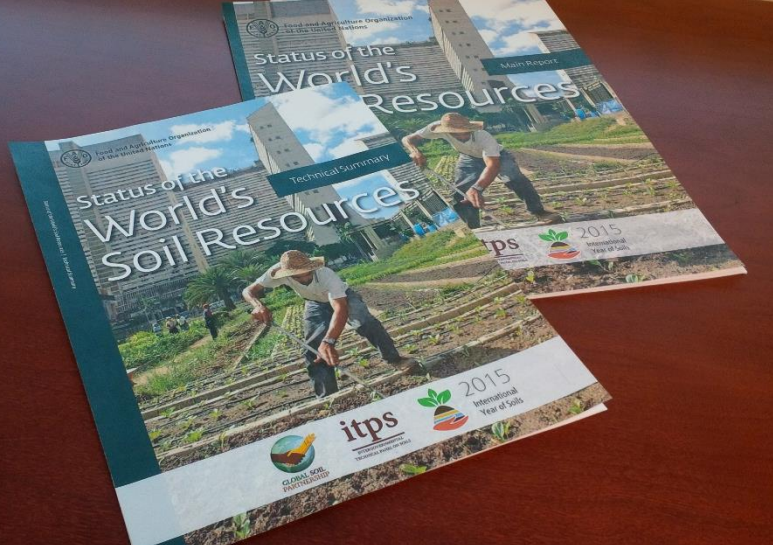
Photo by Lance Cheung, USDA

## Introduction

NRCS has had an international presence and involvement since the agency was established in the 1930s. A full range of activities help foreign Governments develop, use, and protect their natural resources, contributing to U.S. foreign policy by promoting economic stability, reducing poverty, and solving world food problems. Furthermore, U.S. domestic agriculture and the agency benefit from access to new technologies, learning best practices, and developing contacts with global stakeholders. NRCS staff regularly participate in international meetings, present findings at conferences, support scientific and technical exchanges, engage in postdisaster recovery assistance, and provide short-term and long-term technical assistance.

Some of the activities, over the previous years, required IPD to facilitate the deployment of more than 65 agricultural advisors to serve—for up to 18 months on Provincial Reconstruction Teams—in Iraq and Afghanistan, having scientists present papers and posters at the 20th World Congress of Soil Science in Jeju, South Korea, and technical experts participate in long-term research collaboration to study frozen desert soils in Antarctica.

Additionally, agency experts also regularly seek out volunteer assignments offered through nongovernmental organizations. These activities are not captured in the IPD annual reports, but they do provide agency staff with additional opportunities to participate in international development projects and gain new experiences.



*The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations released the 648-page “Status of the World’s Soil Resources” main report, along with a 94-page technical summary, on December 4, 2015. More than 200 international experts, to include members of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, contributed their scientific expertise to develop the documents. Photo courtesy of NRCS-IPD*

## FY 2016 Program Highlights

### UNITED NATIONS OBSERVANCE: INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SOILS

The United Nations proclaimed, as part of its official observances, calendar year 2015 as the International Year of Soils and December 5 as World Soil Day. NRCS scientists participated in several activities organized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to raise awareness and address the challenges of sustainably managing this vital natural resource.

NRCS experts have been contributing to the UN Global Soil Partnership, which includes the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS), since 2013. Collaboration also continued during the International Year of Soils through research activities, speaking engagements, and panel discussions. In celebration of World Soil Day at the FAO Rome headquarters, the ITPS released the long anticipated “Status of the World’s Soil Resources” report. NRCS scientists were among the more than 200 international experts who contributed to the development of the 648-page publication.

Lastly, NRCS concluded the year by hosting a closeout ceremony on December 3 at the USDA headquarters. The ceremony celebrated the accomplishments of a very eventful year and aimed at continuing the promotion of global soil research.

### CAPACITY BUILDING: SOILS TRAINING EVENT FOR HAITI

NRCS hosted, in collaboration with Tuskegee and Auburn Universities, a 3-week soils training event for 14 officials from the Haitian Ministry of Agriculture. The Haitian scientists traveled to Alabama, July 10-30, 2016, to receive technical training on soil mapping and developing inventories, as well as to observe real-world applications during field visits. NRCS was particularly pleased with the partnership approach in organizing the event, as it provided participants with a more in-depth learning experience by integrating the expertise of multiple instructors. The skills learned during the training in Alabama will allow the officials to further improve their conservation planning in Haiti.

The training event was funded by the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) Cochran Fellowship Program and was a continuation of previous capacity building efforts with the Haitian Government. In 2014, a NRCS team traveled to Haiti to assist with the country’s Pilot Soil Survey project.





*Officials from Mexico's Ministry of Agriculture discuss a soil probe sample with NRCS Rangeland Management Specialist Alan Bower (right), during a field exercise, August 31, 2016.*

*The officials participated in an NRCS-organized Conservation Planning Course, instructed for the first time in Spanish.*

**Photo by Jonathan Groveman, NRCS**

### **CROSS-BORDER ACTIVITIES: CANADA AND MEXICO**

Bilateral natural resource management efforts continued throughout FY 2016, as NRCS technical experts regularly engaged with their respective counterparts from Canada and Mexico. Staff from several States participated in joint activities to explore solutions to conservation challenges of mutual concern. These included meetings with Canadian officials to address the water quality of Lake Champlain and Lake Erie or workshops with Mexican officials to coordinate measures to protect and improve migration routes of Monarch butterflies. Additionally, one NRCS employee participated in a U.S. Department of State sponsored Fulbright Exchange Program and was able to observe environmental challenges Mexican officials face. This opportunity allowed NRCS to also share information, such as the roles and responsibilities of conservation districts in the United States.

NRCS also hosted a delegation from Mexico's Ministry of Agriculture for climate change meetings in Texas and California, July 18-22, 2016. These discussions directly supported Mexico's ongoing interest in the USDA Climate Hubs and their efforts in establishing their own hubs in the future. Furthermore, the FAS funded a training event for NRCS to facilitate a learning opportunity for Mexican officials. Bilingual technical experts of the agency taught the Conservation Planning Course in Spanish, August 29 to September 2, 2016, in California.

In addition, significant senior leader engagements continued to set the conditions for a cooperative approach to the management of shared natural resources. Representatives from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada met with NRCS leadership in Washington, DC, on June 28, 2016, to discuss current and joint initiatives and to propose future projects along strategic priorities. Likewise, NRCS and Mexico's Ministry of Agriculture continued exploring potential agreements to expand technical collaboration between both countries.

### **LONG-TERM TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: PACIFIC ISLAND NATIONS**

Two NRCS employees began their 3-year residential assignments in the spring of 2016, which will allow them to provide technical assistance in the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau. As part of a long-term strategy, the conservationists will closely work with the host Governments to improve agricultural production and mitigate climate change impacts.

Furthermore, the employees will serve on U.S. Embassy country teams as senior agricultural advisors and will also collaborate with other members of the foreign assistance community, such as the U.S. Peace Corps. These ongoing residential assignments continue to be significant contributions made by NRCS in support of the U.S. Government's commitment to the Compact of Free Association agreement.

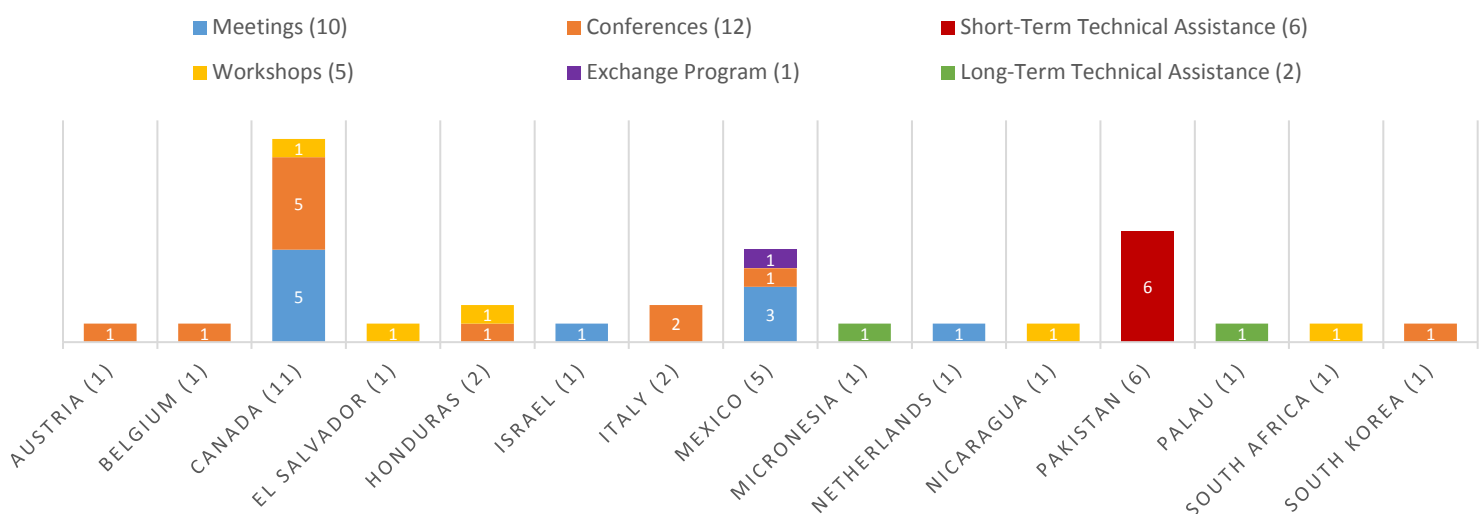
## By the Numbers

### INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

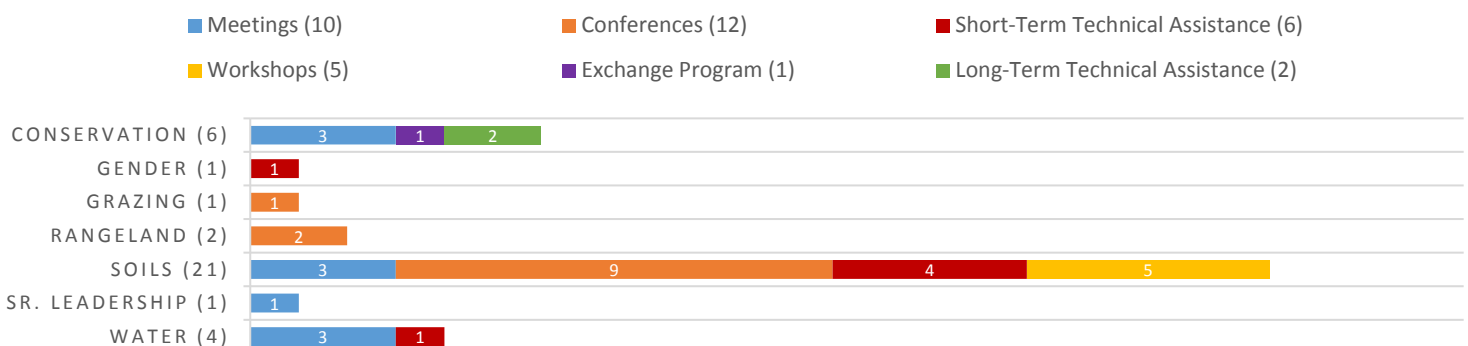
NRCS employees participated in 36 international trips in FY 2016; taking them to 15 different countries. The majority of the trips were to Canada (11), Pakistan (6), and Mexico (5).

These 36 international trips provided NRCS employees the opportunity to participate in 10 meetings, attend or speak at 12 conferences, provide instruction at five workshops, participate in one exchange program, and support six short-term and two long-term (residential) technical assistance assignments. Soils related work was by far the most popular topic (21).

### 36 INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL ASSIGNMENTS



### TOPICS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS



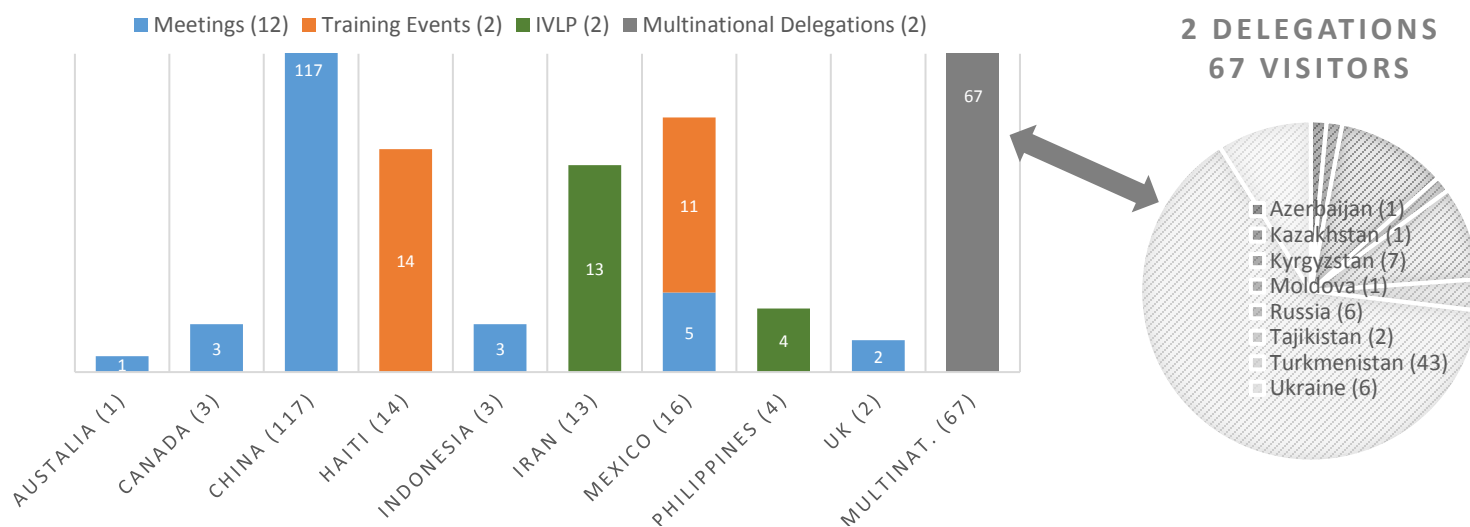
## FOREIGN COUNTRY VISITORS

In FY 2016, IPD supported 18 requests for NRCS staff to meet with visitors from foreign countries. These engagements included meetings for the exchange of scientific and technical information, policy discussions, and training activities. The agency maintains an outstanding international reputation and is continuously sought out by foreign officials for guidance and sharing of information. This year, general resource conservation (8) and soil conservation (5) were the most popular requests.

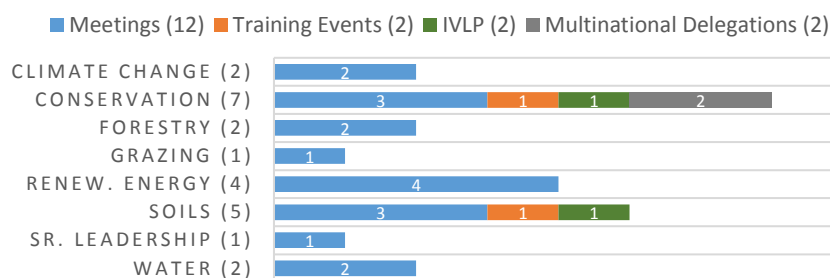
On 16 occasions, NRCS had the opportunity to build and maintain relations with foreign officials from nine countries. These bilateral engagements included 12 meetings, two training events for officials from Haiti (3 weeks) and Mexico (1 week), as well as two requests in support of the U.S. State Department's IVLP to meet with representatives from Iran and the Philippines. Furthermore, IPD also supported two multinational delegation visits from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. These visits were comprised of representatives from nine additional countries.

In total, IPD facilitated opportunities for NRCS staff to meet and interact with 240 foreign visitors from 18 countries. This year the majority of visitors came from China (117), Turkmenistan (42), and Mexico (16).

### 18 REQUESTS / 240 FOREIGN VISITORS



### TOPICS OF VISIT REQUESTS (SOME VISITS INCLUDED SEVERAL TOPICS)





## FOREIGN COUNTRY VOLUNTEERS

In FY 2016, NRCS also supported requests to host five volunteers from foreign countries. The cooperative arrangement allows foreign nationals to gain valuable field experience in conservation while providing the agency numerous hours of service in return. The five volunteers came from Cameroon (1), India (1), Iraq (2), and Nepal (1). The State of Iowa hosted three of the volunteers.

## NRCS EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

In total, 20 employees traveled to support the 36 international trips, with two employees traveling for the first time for NRCS. Such international TDYs provide great opportunities for professional development while also increasing cultural awareness. In FY 2016, 14 employees traveled once, two employees traveled twice, one employee traveled three times, two employees traveled four times, and one employee traveled seven times.

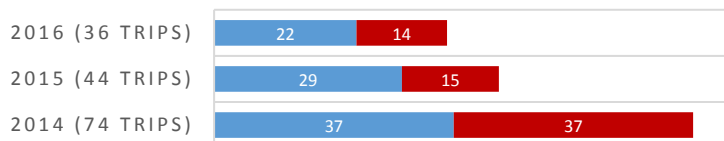
Twenty-five NRCS employees supported 16 visitation requests (does not include the two training events), 21 employees met with visitors once, five employees met visitors twice, three employees met three times with visitors, and one employee met with visitors on four occasions.

## YEARLY COMPARISONS

Following charts provide an overview of key statistics of the agency's international engagement volume for the last three fiscal years. The majority of travel has been to Canada and Mexico in support of cross-border cooperation, as well as to Pakistan to provide technical assistance. Furthermore, in FY 2014, NRCS staff traveled to Haiti to support a Pilot Soil Survey project. Visits by foreign officials increased during FY 2016, with China requesting the majority of presentations.

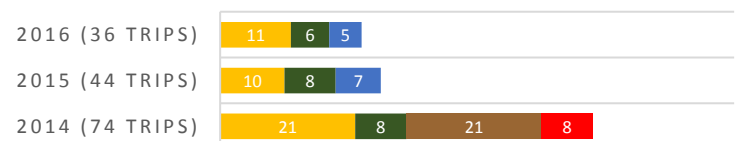
### INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

■ Meetings, Conferences  
■ Technical Assistance, Workshops, Exchanges



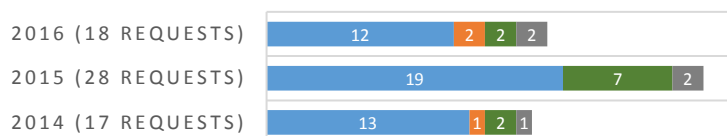
### MOST TRAVELED COUNTRIES

■ Canada ■ Pakistan ■ Mexico  
■ Haiti ■ South Korea



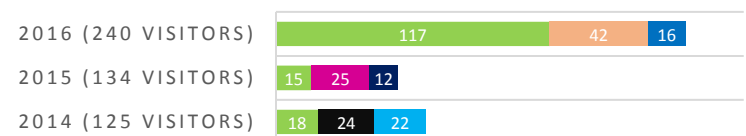
### VISIT REQUESTS

■ Meetings ■ Training Events  
■ IVLP ■ Multinational Delegations



### MOST FOREIGN VISITORS

■ China ■ Turkmenistan ■ Mexico ■ Thailand  
■ Nepal ■ France ■ Kenya





*NRCS National Watershed Programs Team Leader Kevin Farmer (left), works with an interpreter, George Mason University's Dr. Eugene Yu (center), to answer questions from a Chinese delegation, September 19, 2016. Farmer gave a presentation about the agency's Emergency Watershed Protection Program.*

*Photo courtesy of NRCS-IPD*

## Selection of Country Activity Reports

NRCS supported 54 international activities during FY 2016, which included conferences, workshops, meetings, and technical assistance. Below are brief summaries of activities with select countries. Contact IPD for more information or to learn about activities in other countries not specifically mentioned in this report.

### **CHINA**

NRCS continued to have frequent engagements with officials from China during FY 2016. Throughout the year, the agency hosted six delegations with a total of 117 officials from China's Ministry of Agriculture or associated institutions. Usually, each delegation met with one or two agency experts at the Washington, DC, headquarters to receive a presentation on a particular subject. Renewable energy was the most frequently requested topic this year. IPD also organized a day-long visit for one delegation to meet with several NRCS subject matter experts and discuss a variety of topics related to agriculture. During this event, presentations focused on watersheds, water management, anaerobic digesters and manure gasifiers, web soil survey, as well as rural energy programs (IPD invited Rural Development to participate in the event). Additionally, NRCS also hosted a group of Chinese scientists at the National Water and Climate Center in Portland, OR. The group participated in a FAS Cochran Fellowship Program and, in coordination with the University of California, Davis, visited the facility to learn more about applications for climate-smart agriculture. China is establishing their own climate hubs, similar to those of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### **CENTRAL AMERICA – EL SALVADOR, HONDURAS, NICARAGUA**

One NRCS employee traveled to three Central American countries (El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua) to serve on an instructor team during an Advanced Digital Soil Mapping workshop series. Each workshop lasted 5 days and included both classroom and field training activities. The students, such as soil scientists from El Salvador's Ministry of Agriculture and Environment, benefited from the instructor's expertise and capabilities to modify the curriculum to fit each country's context. This opportunity, organized by Purdue University and in cooperation with Catholic Relief Services, supported the Howard G. Buffet Foundation's Global Water Initiative.



*The USDA Pakistan Team poses with U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack (center) after collectively receiving a 2016 Abraham Lincoln Honor Award, September 13, 2016. NRCS Civil Engineer Jon Fripp (third from left) and NRCS Agronomist Mike Kucera (third from right) made several trips to Pakistan to provide technical assistance in support of multiyear FAS-led projects.*

**Photo courtesy of Mike Kucera, NRCS**

## **ISRAEL**

A senior-level agency employee joined a delegation, led by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, during a trip to Israel in June 2016. The week-long trip provided opportunities for the delegation to learn about Israel's climate-smart agriculture policies and observe water conservation practices. Both Israel and California are continuously confronted with extended periods of drought and officials are very interested in sharing best practices.

## **NETHERLANDS**

An NRCS expert had the opportunity to visit Wageningen University, one of the world's leading agricultural research institutions, as part of a 1-week delegation trip to the Netherlands, December 5-12, 2015. One of the highlights was a demonstration on how saline water is used for agricultural production. Additionally, during the trip, organized by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, bilateral meetings with officials from the Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture continued. Both the Californians and the Dutch agreed to intensify collaboration in addressing climate change by signing a formal agreement.

## **PAKISTAN**

For several years, NRCS subject matter experts have been supporting multiyear projects that are facilitated through the FAS and several partners, such as the UN FAO and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. Since 2013, NRCS responded to soil fertility and irrigation capacity building requests in Pakistan and several long-term activities concluded with trips by three employees in October 2015. Fortunately, new opportunities allowed NRCS to continue conservation work and technical experts returned to Pakistan to assist with improving the country's vital agricultural sector. In March 2016, one employee participated in strategic planning meetings with the Pakistani Government and development partners, to address water management challenges in both rain fed and irrigated areas. Another employee traveled to Pakistan in April 2016 to focus on soil health education activities, in particular related to increasing awareness about nutrient management and updating the country's 2001 fertilizer policy. Additional trips are likely to occur over the next few years to support long-term development goals. Lastly, the overall success and contributions of the entire USDA Pakistan Team (projects from 2013 to 2015) were recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture during an award ceremony on September 13, 2016.



*NRCS Soil Health Specialist Jay Fuhrer (center – in the soil pit) gathers a sample for an infiltration demonstration, April 20, 2016, at a ranch near Ladysmith, South Africa.*

**Photo courtesy of Jay Fuhrer, NRCS**

### **SOUTH AFRICA**

One NRCS employee conducted a series of trainings at the 2016 Annual South Africa Workshop, April 7-24, 2016. Approximately 50 participants learned additional soil health principles, such as minimizing soil disturbance, the advantages of plant diversity, and soil armor. Over a 2-week period, five workshops were conducted at different locations, which included visits to dairy farms, ranches, and cash grain farms.

### **SOUTH KOREA**

A NRCS senior executive was invited to give a speech about the evolution of U.S. soil policy at an international symposium in Seoul, South Korea, November 24-27, 2015. The professional gathering was titled “Surface Soil, the Key for Human and Ecosystems” and also included field excursions. During this engagement, scientists from several countries, such as Australia, China, Germany, and Russia, shared related policy and research efforts to address soil erosion. Additionally, the NRCS representative also provided congratulatory remarks in celebration of the International Year of Soils.



# Division Operations

## PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Throughout FY 2016, IPD evaluated policies and procedures to improve the overall efficiency and management of the agency's international activities. This included ongoing coordination with the FAS, as well as other sister agencies among the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to synchronize operations. Additionally, IPD provided agency staff with new or updated guidance and hosted three webinars to further increase awareness about international opportunities.

## INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL PROGRAM

IPD's International Travel Program provides a range of support functions that enable agency employees to conduct official U.S. Government business in foreign countries. This includes obtaining official passports and visas to undertake travel, requesting country clearances from U.S. Embassies, and providing guidance on additional topics, such as traveling with electronic devices, mandatory security training, or immunizations.

During FY 2016, 70 passport transactions were processed to support 36 trips, 19 visas, and 34 renewals to maintain travel readiness.

## COMMUNICATION PRODUCTS

Five national bulletins were prepared and released in FY 2016:

- Engagement with Cuba ([NB 280-16-1](#))
- IPD FY 2015 Annual Report ([NB 280-16-2](#))
- Webinar on Providing International Technical Assistance Through NGOs ([NB-280-16-3](#))
- Webinar on the Pakistan Project ([NB-280-16-4](#))
- Webinar on International Travel Procedures ([NB-280-16-5](#))

Two editions of the IPD Newsletter were distributed during FY 2016. The biannual publication covered July-December 2015 and January-June 2016.



[January 2016 edition](#)



[July 2016 edition](#)

## STAFF LISTING

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